

Fishing for coalition partners, German Greens intervene in Hesse elections

Hendrik Paul
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On Monday, January 21, the former German foreign minister and leading member of the Green Party, Joschka Fischer, addressed a meeting in Wiesbaden during the final week of campaigning in the Hesse state elections. After nearly one and a half years of abstaining from party politics, Fischer's appearance in Wiesbaden was aimed at assisting the campaign of the Greens to re-enter the state government.

Hesse is regarded as the birthplace of the German Greens and was the first state to witness participation by a Green Party faction. So far, however, the party's election campaign in the state has been a routine affair, which has attracted little public notice. The party evidently assumed that the re-election of the right-wing state prime minister, Roland Koch (Christian Democratic Union), was inevitable and there was little sense in mobilising Green supporters for a real campaign.

The Green Party leadership was in particular surprised at the extent of public opposition to the racist anti-immigrant campaign organised by Koch. The Green leadership is broadly contemptuous of the working population and had assumed there would be broad support for the Koch campaign. In fact, Koch's initiative has backfired and his popularity has slumped according to recent opinion polls, which now suggest a close race between the CDU and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

The Greens have been unable to profit, however, from the rapid decline in support for the CDU. Support for the party is polling at 7 percent with the likelihood that its share will drop even further before Sunday's election. This represents the poorest showing for the party in the state for the past 25 years, and it is noticeable that media interest in the Greens is also on the wane. Only one local reporter turned up for the election campaign appearance of the former Green Party environment secretary Jürgen Trittin last week.

The meeting with Fischer was therefore planned on the basis of recapturing some media interest. Party activists loudly proclaimed the entry of the former Green leader into the splendid concert hall in Wiesbaden, surrounded by a host of photographers. The hall was ablaze with camera lights as Fischer took his place on stage and the party's local candidate in the election, Tarek Al-Wazir, was forced to call the journalists and photographers to order. Over 100 journalists had come from all over Europe to chart the re-entry of the former Green chieftain

to the political stage.

The rest of the meeting, however, was all downhill. Fischer resorted to his customary bluster in his speech, which was peppered with generalities. He had nothing worthwhile to say about any of the pressing social problems in Germany today, and leading newspapers registered their disappointment with his speech the next day. According to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, "The lion roared, but no longer has anything to say." In its online edition, *Die Zeit* also noted that "Fischer had nothing new to say."

Barely any of the commentators, however, dealt with the question of why Fischer's clichés sounded so tired and hollow. The principal reason is the party's attempt to fish for support and alliances from all sides—including cooperation with the CDU. The Greens already work together with the CDU in Hesse at the local level. Both parties share power in a coalition in the state's biggest city—the finance metropolis of Frankfurt. According to the city's CDU mayor, Petra Roth, collaboration with the Greens in the city constitutes a "coalition of realism."

While the Greens are intent on drawing closer to the CDU, they confront the dilemma in Hesse that support for the conservatives has slumped and there is every possibility that on Sunday an alternative could emerge in the form of an SPD-Green government—with the tacit support of the Left Party.

Against this background the speeches by Fischer and leading Green candidate Al-Wazir concentrated on the simplistic but widespread demand: Koch has to go! Koch was criticised by both speakers for his environmental and education policies as well as his racist campaign, but neither of the two Greens spelt out the real nature of Koch's offensive against immigrant youth, i.e., an effort to divert social anger and promote law-and-order policies in order to build up the power of the state. After all, the Greens have already played their own role in encouraging such policies. For seven years the party supported at a federal level the law-and-order policies introduced by Interior Minister Otto Schily, who drastically curtailed rights for immigrants and undermined a number of basic democratic rights.

According to Fischer the only alternative to the CDU government in Hesse was a coalition of the SPD and Greens. He made no attempt, however, to explain how anything would

be different in the state with an SPD-Green government. Voters can recall the Green election slogan in 1998, when the party called for the replacement of the CDU chancellor, Helmut Kohl—“Kohl has to go!” On this basis a so-called red-green “alternative” took power—the SPD and the Greens led by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Vice Chancellor and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer.

For many millions of Germans the results of the policies introduced by the SPD-Green government were traumatic. The coalition government introduced the Agenda 2010 program and the Hartz IV laws, which represented the most comprehensive attack on the welfare protections since the Second World War. The same government was the first in postwar history to send German troops to fight abroad. It also abolished the postwar right to asylum. Bowing to the demands of big business, the Greens even abandoned their demand for the immediate cessation of the use of nuclear power, agreeing to delay any such move for many years.

Fischer made clear that his campaign against Roland Koch should not be regarded as hostility to the CDU. Both speakers went to some lengths to draw a distinction between Koch and the rest of the CDU. Fischer declared he had been “very hopeful” of reaching agreement with the CDU over the issue of immigration until “Roland Koch decided it was necessary to reach for the big stick.” Koch, according to Fischer, had “done a disservice to a modern CDU.”

The Greens in Hesse are keen to regain power, but this is unlikely with Koch as leader of the CDU in the state. However, the party remains open to the prospect of sharing power with the conservatives in other states and regions. One month after the Hesse vote another election takes place in Hamburg where the Greens have made no secret of their readiness to work with the CDU. It would have fatal consequences for the Greens in Hamburg if their colleagues in Hesse were now to be overly aggressive in their campaign against the CDU.

Even the CDU acknowledges that it has no principled differences with the Greens. When Fischer withdrew from political office following the election defeat of the SPD-Green federal government in September 2005 this was regarded by the CDU as a signal that the Greens were ready to work with them—up to the federal level. Leading CDU politicians such as Interior Minister Wolfgang Schäuble or Chancellor Angela Merkel toyed with the prospect of a coalition with the Greens and the free-market FDP (Free Democratic Party) before deciding instead to form a coalition with the SPD.

In this respect it is necessary to examine a number of the few concrete suggestions made by Fischer in his speech. In response to Koch’s campaign against immigrant youth, for example, Fischer responded by making the right-wing demand for more police and to provide them with better training and equipment. While Fischer also called for more social workers to ease social tensions the reality is that such professionals are the first to lose their jobs when the state administration decides

to implement more savings and cuts.

Fischer also approached the issues of education and environmental policy entirely from the standpoint of economic and business priorities. His opposition to nuclear energy was based on the extensive costs involved, which included the expense of finding investors. In the meantime the search for alternative energies has developed into its own lucrative business, which is also heavily dependent on public (i.e., taxpayers’) subsidies. Fischer repeated the deeply anti-working class view of the Greens, saying he saw no problem with high energy prices because this would supposedly encourage a shift towards alternative fuels.

At the same it was notable that a number of vital issues were ignored in Wiesbaden. While he was treated like a pop star Fischer said nothing about the crash in world stock markets, which led the German DAX index to lose over €60 billion in a single day. Any mention of the crisis of the world capitalist system would serve to further undermine the reformist outlook of pressuring the powers-that-be, which is contained in the Green Party election manifesto.

The second major issue Fischer chose to ignore was the rapid growth of poverty in Germany. He refused to address the astounding growth of social inequality, which has been produced by the policies he supported as a leading minister in the former federal government. No mention was made of the crisis facing those unemployed forced to survive on the miserly Hartz IV payments. Nothing was said about the 2 million workers in Germany who are forced to work for less than €5 per hour, while company profits and executive salaries go through the roof. The manner in which Fischer ignored the plight of a large proportion of the population speaks volumes about the type of “alternative” on offer from the Greens.

While the Greens pay special attention to ensure that their attacks on the CDU do not have detrimental consequences for the party beyond the borders of Hesse, they have nothing to say concerning crucial national and international political and social developments.

In fact, it is precisely such global events—the developing recession in the United States, the increase in oil prices, the panic on the international stock markets and the explosion of militarism in the name of the “war on terror”—which have the most powerful and direct effect on the electorate of Hesse, rather than the small change of Hesse state politics and tactical manoeuvring which features so prominently in the election propaganda of the Greens.



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